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AUTHOR Al-Khanji, Rajai
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ABSTRACT

The Strategic Interaction method has been found to be effective in developing oral skills among students in an intensive English language program at the University of Jordan, and holds promise for language instruction in other contexts. The method, which is predominantly communicative in nature, stresses language use and interaction in discourse by involving students in planned conversational scenarios. It integrates the informational, transactional, and interactional dimensions of conversation, and encourages spontaneity and creativity in both teacher and students. Implementation of the method in the intensive English course met enthusiastic student response. Strategic Interaction and other theatrical methods should be used more frequently in Jordanian schools, but teachers must first be exposed to the method and its advantages. (MSE)

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Strategic Interaction:A Method That Enhances Communicative Competence

Rajai Al-Khanji. University of Jordan

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to report an application of an innovative teaching method, Strategic Interaction (SI), which has demonstrated some impressive results in terms of developing oral language proficiency among students at the Intensive English Program-University of Jordan, as well as in other places in Jordan. The paper also calls for the need to introduce theatrical techniques in foreign language teaching, such as the SI method, in our Jordanian schools for improving the speaking skill since students nearly always express communicative ability as their primary interest in learning English.

Introduction

Complaints about the inability of our students in most Jordanian public schools to use English in speaking and in writing raise some important questions on current classroom procedures for teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Why, after eight years of language learning, are students unable to communicate effectively using the language they have so painstakingly studied? How often have we heard students say that they can at best read and translate their second language, but would be incapable of

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conveying orally basic needs and desires so important in the activity of daily life? Students often report that they are afraid of being required to perform spontaneously in class, a formidable task for anyone whose only exposure to a foreign language is structure drills, grammar rules, or reading translation. It is becoming obvious to English teachers that the failure of their students to acquire some ability in communication does not stem from unmotivated learners whose dearth of grammatical knowledge impedes their foreign language growth. How much longer can we give our students years of English language learning that yield only minimum returns for their investment? If students and teachers agree that language learning and teaching should be firmly rooted in a philosophy of language in which communication of meaningful messages is central, then new teaching and learning designs for classroom use will emerge to lead them to their goal.

The Intensive Program

Students join the Intensive English Program in order to improve their English and consequently to be able to pass an entrance examination which qualifies them to join the English Department. Students are usually given four basic courses: writing, reading, structure and oral skills. Oral skills are further divided into two courses one of them is entitled "Tutorial". The discussion which follows

will report what is exactly done in the tutorial course when teaching conversational skills.

The English Course:

It was decided at the outset that the English syllabus must move away from the character of the public school education, that is, to avoid as much as possible English language features such as:

1. English seen as a content course (lecturing) rather than a skill;
2. a disproportionate ratio of teacher talk to student talk;
3. teaching for recognition but not necessarily for language use and production;
4. an emphasis on covering a certain set of linguistic items without much flexibility concerning students' needs.

It was , therefore , decided to adopt an innovative teaching approach quite different from the structural approaches which are still in widespread use in many public schools. The non-conventional approach to be followed was Strategic Interaction (SI) by Robert Di Pietro (1983).[1]

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1. Robert DI Pietro. 1983. Scenarios, Discourse, and Real-Life Roles. In Methods That Work, ed. by J.Oller and P. Richard-Amato, 226-238. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House .

Strategic Interaction:

SI is a recently developed teaching method which can be characterized as predominantly communicative. This approach, which stresses language use and interaction in discourse, underlines the fact that learning can best be promoted if students use language strategically in a purposeful way. Furthermore, it emphasizes that learners rather than teachers or syllabuses are the ones who decide what learning needs are in a foreign language instruction. By giving equal importance to both language forms and functions, the SI classroom activities depend on involoving students in conversation through scenarios. The yardstick for successful and authentic interaction in SI depends on the open-ended scenario in which students have a stake in achieving a desired outcome. To do this, learners are given distinct communicative goals to achieve. They are free to follow different solutions in order to reach these goals.

Di Pietro (1982) identifies three dimensions of conversational language:[2]

1. informational, which contains the grammatical and the semantic elements;

2. transactional, the means by which actions are motivated in order to achieve a goal through the use of strategies and counter-strategies in solving problems and

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2. Robert Di Pietro. 1982. The Open-Ended Scenario:A New Approach to Conversation. In TESOL Quarterly, volume 16, number 1,15-20 .

3. interactional, which shows what to send in a message in order to fulfill a need and execute roles of various types.

An example of these three dimensions at work simultaneously in a linguistic encounter may be seen in the following exchange:

Would you like to eat at a restaurant?

(1)	(2)	(3)
Yes, why not?	I can't, I'm too busy.	I don't know; let me think.

Each response embodies all three dimensions of language use as outlined by Di Pietro. On the informational level, the replies suggest the necessity for knowledge of linguistic forms that are used for accepting or declining invitations. The transactional dimension is reflected by the response the speaker chooses, thus allowing him/her to exercise his/her options and take a position. The interactional dimension colors the response of the speaker, and assigns to it a role reflecting either a willing, enthusiastic companion (response 1), and unwilling but polite friend (response 2), or an indecisive but probably unwilling acquaintance (response 3).

Applying the SI model:

The SI model was used with the intensive program students during the 1986/1987 academic year. On the first day of class, instructors presented an outline about the

nature of the course to the students, explaining objectives and procedures. The students were familiarized with the methodology and the basic philosophy of SI. The following brief introduction was read out to the students:

> Strategic Interaction is more than an English grammar course filled with drills and rules for language formation. We will be more interested this year in using English to convery meaningful messages in the framework of conversation.

The students responded enthusiastically to the prospect of having an opportunity to speak English. The students were made aware that there was no syllabus to be followed and that the English course would grow out of their input in the creation of scenarios and other class activities.

The group process in SI is a central component since small group work allows students to profit from each other's knowledge of English in the creation of scenarios and it also enhances a spirit of cooperation. Moreover , since all students had studies English for at least six years, the concept of group work can be a good means of tapping what is already in their linguistic repertoire and of expanding their knowledge. The following is a description of how classroom activities are managed in implementing the method.

Classroom Procedures:

The management of time in the classroom was divided into three stages: On-Stage, Off-Stage, and Debriefing Stage. During the off-stage phase, students were presented with

a scenario which contains an element of dramatic tension. Tension-building situations help learners to be involved in such a way that they must make a decision. The following is an example of the scenario which was first given to students:[3]

Lunch at a Restaurant

> Some foreigners go to a restaurant for lunch. The waiter/waitress shows them to a table and give them the menu. When the waitress comes back for their order, the foreigners point out to some items on the menu. The food comes but they discover that it is not exactly what they expected. How would they react? How would the waitress react?

Students were reminded that the element of tension in the scenario was intended to motivate them to talk about something in a serious way. Namely, the tension was to be created by dissimilar vested interests of personalities who happen to encounter each other and the aim is to gain this encounter by using strategies and counter-strategies. Students were then directed to work in groups and prepare roles required by the scenario. They were given some time to discuss possible strategies that could be used in their favor. The teacher served as a resource person supplying them with the language needed and also helping them clarify their roles.In the case of the given scenario, "Lunch at a Restaurant", the teacher provided some helpful expressions

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3. The reader can see other examples of scenario situations in Appendix at the end.

and vocabulary items related to the restaurant context. However, students were encouraged to ask about any specific words/ structures they needed to use for their roles in the scenario. During that time, the classrooms were filled with questions that focussed on the semantic and strategic values of English; rarely would students ask if their grammar was correct. Competent students supported the work of the weaker ones by explaining to them the content of a message, or creating for them minor roles to be played in the staging of the scenario.

After off-stage preparation, the students would submit a copy of what they had written before beginning rehearsal for the class presentation. Their scripts would be corrected for global errors involving structures likely to be unintelligible. It is clear that the language in each scenario was not grammatically sequenced, since discourse dictates the use of some structures that traditionally would be reserved for advanced grammar courses.

Let us now turn our attention to the On-Stage phase of the SI English class. Seenarios prepared by different groups were enacted at this phase. Each group started to perform the scenario, while the rest of the class watched. Students were told that no easy solutions would be accepted since they need to argue and not to give up easily. The students would often report a feeling of nervousness and anxiety when performing for the first time in front of an audience, even though they were aware of the non-threatening class

atmosphere. As Gattengo (1976)[4] tells us, it is precisely this anxiety which, in turn, promotes mental energy that contributes to language growth. Finally, at this phase, the teacher would record the performances of the different groups for later use during the final phase of SI. The Debriefing period followed the presentation of the scenarios. At this phase, students were allowed to comment on or question the performances they witnessed. The teacher would replay the recorded material for evaluation together with the whole class. Teachers would keep a slow-paced, uncluttered approach when responding to student questions. That would allow students the time they needed to process both questions and answers and also offer to the teacher a reflective atmosphere most needed in deciding precisely how to answer a question, how much information to give the learners, or how relevant the answer would be in terms of the students' total linguistic knowledge. It was during the debriefing stage that teachers would choose to elaborate on language form and function in terms of student interest, need, and level. Thus, lessons were not meant to be form-based, grammatically sequenced material, but rather student-centered, need-oriented forums for language use. When all student questions had been answered depending on student interest, learners would participate in one of the following activities:

1. A second performance of scenarios by volunteer groups,

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4. Caleb Gattengo. 1976. The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages. P.9.New York: Educational Solutions, Inc .

followed by discussion of roles and strategies.

2. A discussion of other directions a specific scenario could have taken.

3. Student generated questions directed to the class on a paraticular scenario.

At the end of each new scenario, students were required to write down all language forms and vocabulary items introduced because all these items were presented at students' request and also because those were the real teaching material that resulted from language use in the classroom. The language material would then be included in any future evaluation given either in spoken or written form.

Finally, we must keep in mind that the debriefing period period is not a time for structure drills and grammar-translation. It is rather a time to use each scenario to its fullest as a real language sample and springboard for meaningful activity.

Conclusion:

Strategic Interaction should be considered for the English language classroom as a supplementary activity for teaching conversational skills. On the other hand, whenever a method is adopted, certain adjustments could be made, while retaining the basic appraoch of the method, to meet the needs of both learner and teacher. SI is no

exception. Any adjustment can be made as long as students are given a chance to generate and use language for the communication of real meaning.

Our experience has shown us that the SI design is capable of renewing class interest and enthusiasm at each scenario creation in the English classroom. Stated simply, the method encourages both teacher and student creativity and spontaneity . On this fact alone, SI deserves to be explained to the many instructors for whom the audio-lingual method is, unfortunately, still the answer to English language education in our public schools. Pre-SI implementation workshops could, for instance, be given to local high school language teachers; these could be later complemented by follow-up sessions during which instructors using this method could share their experience and reflect on it in light of the original model. SI, if carefully implemented, will prove to be a rewarding method for teachers who are truly concerned with promoting foreign language study and developing interactional skills in their students.

Appendix

The following are examples of some scenarios by Di Pietro :

1. Role A: You've just had a rather serious heart attack and are confined to the hospital. Your doctor seems hesitant to tell you about your condition. Work out a plan to get him/her to tell you exactly what your chances are for a complete recovery.

   Role B: You are a doctor who is treating a patient with a heart condition. This patient has just had a heart attack and is in the hospital. He doesn't know it yet, but he has just won the national lottery and is a rich man. How will you tell him this news without exciting him so much that he might have another heart attack?

2. You run a flowershop. You have many flowers that are about to wilt. You also have some fresh ones. Here comes a potential customer. Try to sell him the drooping flowers . What kind of sales pitch will you develop?

3. Role A : You have been invited to eat at the home of an new Italian friend. You have no prior knowledge of native Italian cooking. You are served something you really hate. What do you do?

   Role B: You have invited a foreign student to your home for dinner. In order to give a flavour to the native

cuisine, you have chosen a certain dish to be the main course. Observe the reaction of your guest and react accordingly.

4. A passenger on a plane is smoking in a non-smoking section. Passengers in this section get angry. To solve the problem, some passengers call the hostess. What the passengers say? How would the smoker defend himself? What would the hostess do?